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Literacy, Orality, and Literature in Israel

STUART WEEKS

It is rarely assumed or asserted any more that monarchic Israel enjoyed high levels of popular literacy, and there is little evidence for any circumstance or mechanism in Iron Age Palestine which might have given rise to what would have been, by ancient norms, such a very unusual phenomenon; this new caution prevails in part, perhaps, because similar assumptions have been challenged successfully for later Roman culture and even for the famously literate Athenian population.¹ It has become more tenable these days to start with the assumption that in Israel, as elsewhere, literacy (even in the broadest sense) was probably limited to quite a small proportion of the population, and that there must have been a substantial number of Israelites, perhaps even a vast majority, whose culture remained essentially oral.

The influence of such orality on the biblical literature has long been appreciated, of course, both by those earlier scholars who thought in terms of a historical transition from illiteracy to literacy in Israel, and, in recent decades, by those who have recognized the "mixed economy" that more probably persisted. It is widely acknowledged, therefore, that certain compositional aspects of some texts have been shaped by the conventions of oral tradition, while phenomena associated with orality are often adduced in discussions of the origin or transmission of content. It seems unlikely that anyone would now seriously reject the need to consider orality as an important component in Israelite culture, but with an acceptance of that need there comes a corresponding need to think carefully about the place of writing and literature. Indeed, by emphasizing aspects of continuity between literature and oral tradition, we run the risk of ignoring significant discontinuities between the two, and of discounting the very writtenness of the biblical texts in a society where writing was not the only option.

Before turning to that broader issue, though, it would be helpful to say a little more about the historical situation, or rather to stress how little more can be said with any confidence. It is understandably tempt-

1 See especially William V. Harris, *Ancient Literacy* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989).

ing to suppose that literate culture in Israel can be understood by analogy with the better-attested cultures of Egypt and Mesopotamia, or at least that of Ugarit, which would set literacy and literature almost exclusively within the confines of a scribal and priestly élite, trained through an educational system which combined the acquisition of literacy with a process of acculturation.² Israel and Judah certainly had literate scribes and priests, moreover, and a good proportion of the literary and epigraphic material which has survived seems to correspond to their interests. With little direct information on many aspects of the issue, however, we have to be aware of the substantial differences which limit the usefulness of analogy as a tool here.

Scribes in the systems usually evoked were trained at length in the classic literature of their cultures (or of the dominant local culture), learning to read, copy, and recite texts which commonly belonged to an earlier age, and which were frequently written in archaic languages very different from their own. This was not a practical matter of training in foreign tongues for trade or diplomacy, but of education in the broader sense. It did, however, entail some acquisition of practical skills, not least of which was the ability to write at a level beyond the merely adequate.³ It is not a trivial matter to become proficient in the writing of texts in any script, at least for those who begin with experience of none, and children in the modern world progress at a similar rate in the learning of very different types of writing.⁴ This learning, however, effectively reaches a ceiling quite quickly in some scripts, while others are more open-ended. Although any word in Japanese, for example, can be represented using the phonetic *kana* signs, an educated adult will be expected to know the common *kanji*, and a very educated

2 For an excellent overview of scribal education in the region, see David Carr, *Writing on the Tablet of the Heart: Origins of Scripture and Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

3 Of course, not even adequacy was always necessarily achieved, and we should not underestimate the extent to which a scribal class may become a hereditary social class, rather than a guild of experts.

4 The relationship between script and the acquisition of literacy is a complicated one, with some evidence suggesting that logographic scripts may be easier at first, with phonetic, alphabetic scripts providing significant advantages at a later stage, as word-recognition becomes quicker; correspondingly, the orthographic complexities of English prove somewhat harder to learn than does vowelised Hebrew. See especially Shin-Ying Lee, David H. Uttal, and Chuansheng Chen, "Writing Systems and Acquisition of Reading in American, Chinese, and Japanese First-Graders," in *Scripts and Literacy: Reading and Learning to Read Alphabets, Syllabaries and Characters* (ed. I. Taylor and D. R. Olson; Neuropsychology and Cognition 7; Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic, 1995), 247–63; and Esther Geva, "Orthographic and Cognitive Processing in Learning to Read English and Hebrew," in Taylor and Olson, *Scripts and Literacy*, 277–91.

one a high proportion of the rarer ones. In the related case of Chinese, it is doubtful that anyone is familiar with all the signs technically available for use, but the number of logograms known will generally be in proportion to an individual's level of education and experience of reading. The writing systems used for Egyptian and Akkadian have this open-ended quality, along with other features which placed scribal orthography some way beyond basic literacy: it would have been very difficult to write like a scribe without having been trained as a scribe.

None of this, so far as we can tell, would have been an issue for scribes in Israel and Judah. Although the biblical literature shows the influence at some points of literature from various other regions, there is no evidence of any specific, intense grounding in the scribal and literary traditions of either Egypt or Mesopotamia, and we have no very good reason to suppose that there would have been sufficient cultural influence from either region in this period to motivate such an education: it is no small matter to educate one's scribes in the archaic languages and literature of a foreign country.⁵ Even if education did involve the use of literature produced more locally, in Hebrew or Aramaic, these languages did not employ open-ended scripts, and to reach a high level of competence would have required much less practice in reading or copying.⁶ More nebulously, although the point is no less important, it is difficult to tell what perception Israel and Judah had of their own culture in the monarchic period, and we cannot assume the strong sense of cultural and scribal tradition which underpinned the enculturating aspects of education in Egypt and Mesopotamia. There is

5 Carr, *Writing*, 56–59, 84–85, is able to adduce extensive cultural and political connections with both Egypt and Mesopotamia for the Late Bronze Age, but the evidence for the Israelite period in Palestine is altogether much thinner, and this is a period of significant political and cultural re-alignment, for which continuity with previous practices cannot be assumed. The literary evidence, especially, would be more persuasive if it pointed in a particular direction or dated from a particular period, but setting the influence of, say, *Amenemope* on Proverbs beside that of *Gilgamesh* on Qoheleth points to something much more atomistic than intensive influence from any one region.

6 Scribes would also, of course, have required less practice in foreign language. For Ugarit, where there seems to have been less emphasis on training in Ugaritic itself than in Mesopotamian languages and literature, Seth L. Sanders summarizes the situation: "The reason there was so little scribal training in West Semitic before the Late Iron Age is that writing was understood as linguistically transparent. Technically, learning it was thought not to require much curriculum beyond the alphabet itself" ("Writing and Early Iron Age Israel: Before National Scripts, Beyond Nations and States," in *Literate Culture and Tenth-Century Canaan: The Tel Zayit Abecedarium in Context* [ed. Ron L. Tappy and P. Kyle McCarter Jr.; Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 2008], 97–112 [105]).

a risk in this, moreover, of imposing entirely anachronistic notions of education.⁷

The different circumstances and requirements suggest that we should beware of looking too far abroad for models of education in Israel or Judah. Despite the absence of direct evidence for schools, it is possible that they existed, and that some scribes learned to read with a full panoply of texts and institutional support.⁸ It hardly seems less likely, however, that all or many learned their basic skills at home, or in a makeshift classroom with a paid tutor, and that sort of route may have been available to others. While the average small farmer would have found little use for writing, it is possible that some members of the merchant or artisan classes would have found an education for their sons cheaper over time than, say, paying a scribe to inscribe jars.⁹ If it

7 Of modern assumptions about education and literacy, M. T. Clanchy writes in another context: "Humanist schoolmasters propagated and reinforced all sorts of myths and dubious ideas about literacy, such as that it stems from schooling rather than the home . . . that its inspiration is secular rather than religious, that it is elitist rather than inclusive, uniform rather than multicultural, and town-centred rather than rural. All these assumptions fed into the state schooling programmes of nineteenth-century reformers . . . and thence into the beliefs of the schooled populations of today." His further comments are particularly appropriate to the discussion here: "Within their own terms of reference . . . the humanists were absolutely right; their peculiar curriculum of ancient Greek and Latin did require a special and exclusive sort of schooling, which was ultimately epitomized in the Victorian Classical Sixths of the English public schools and their equivalents in the other European nations" (*From Memory to Written Record: England 1066–1307* [2d ed.; Oxford: Blackwell, 1993], 15–16).

8 I have written elsewhere on the vexed question of scribal schools and their existence; see Stuart Weeks, *Early Israelite Wisdom* (Oxford Theological Monographs; Oxford: Clarendon, 1994), ch. 8. As Carr, *Writing*, 113, points out, such schools were not always typical of the educational systems even in Egypt and Mesopotamia. Graham Davies has, of course, written on this subject himself; see his "Were There Schools in Ancient Israel?" in *Wisdom in Ancient Israel: Essays in Honour of J. A. Emerton* (ed. J. Day, R. P. Gordon, and H. G. M. Williamson; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 199–211.

9 How far this actually happened is hard to determine. Ian Young ("Israelite Literacy: Interpreting the Evidence," *VT* 48 [1998]: 239–53, 408–22) suggests that the evidence points to literacy only amongst scribes, administrators, and priests, although he holds open the possibility that some craftsmen had minimal skills. His treatment of the famous Lachish Letter 3.4–13, however, shows one aspect of the difficulties. Though this text surely indicates an expectation that junior army officers be literate, Young's conclusion that this shows that "members of the upper class in Judah at this time prided themselves on being part of a literate élite" (411) assumes both an identity of the "upper class" with scribes and administrators, and membership of that class by junior officers; William M. Schniedewind ("Orality and Literacy in Ancient Israel," *RelSRev* 26 [2000]: 327–32) takes it to prove the opposite, and we really do not know about such matters. Sanders, "Writing," puts a case for trade as the context

was confined, then, neither by the complexity of the script nor by the existence of a closed educational system, the extent and the degree of literacy in Israel and Judah at any time may have been determined more by economic convenience and social expectation than by membership of any single profession, and it is difficult, furthermore, to assess quite how literacy would have related to the availability and use of literary texts.¹⁰ Clearly, we are not in a position to say anything definite, except that we should avoid presuming *a priori* some very specific context for the biblical literature.

If the other cultures of the ancient Near East offer little help for determining the social origins of biblical literature, they do, however, provide some important indications of its nature, and help us to set some bounds to the extent of oral influence. At least since Gunkel, and the nineteenth-century romantic interest in folklore, many scholars have viewed some or all of the biblical literature in terms of a fundamental continuity with oral traditions. Whether this is seen in terms of literature "fixing" oral material or of oral-traditional practices shaping the form and presentation of literature, such a view has tended to presume a transition or continuing interaction between the two within an Israelite context. As Niditch puts it, "[t]o study Israelite literature is to examine the place of written words in an essentially oral world and to explore the ways in which the capacity to read and write in turn informs and shapes orally rooted products of the imagination."¹¹

Niditch's own, influential position is more nuanced than that of many. Dundes, for instance, declares that "The Bible consists of orally transmitted tradition written down," and cites with approval the view of Koch, from a form-critical perspective, that "[n]early all the Old Testament, whether the Tetrateuch stories, the psalms, or prophetic speeches, had been passed down orally for a long period before they

within which literacy actually survived the Late Bronze/ Iron Age transition, being picked up only secondarily by the state.

- 10 We should beware of attributing modern uses of literature to ancient readers: both Near Eastern and classical practices suggest that literature was intended more for performance than solitary reading, and although a cultic, liturgical setting is probable for some, we know little about the context in which many texts were read. In any case, however, literacy would not in itself have been the prime qualification for access to literature, so much as entrance to those contexts in which literature was performed, be they the temple, the public square, or the drawing room. On "reading" as "reading out" in the biblical texts, see especially Daniel Boyarin, "Placing Reading: Ancient Israel and Medieval Europe," in *The Ethnography of Reading* (ed. J. Boyarin; Berkeley, Ca.: University of California Press, 1993), 10–37.
- 11 Susan Niditch, *Oral World and Written Word: Orality and Literacy in Ancient Israel* (Library of Ancient Israel; London: SPCK, 1997), 134.

came to be written down."¹² Although such statements have often been made, however, it is most unlikely that they are true. There is a historical problem here, to be sure, insofar as the dates of many texts are disputed, and the circumstances in which they arose uncertain. Even so, it is difficult to understand in some cases why the textual versions should not have appeared almost immediately, if there was a perceived need for the preservation or circulation of the material: writing was not some late development in the society, it is far the most efficient way of preserving material, and works like the psalms are generally supposed to have arisen in circles which would probably have been highly literate.¹³ There are some more fundamental issues here, however, and before turning to questions about the interaction of the oral and written, let us focus for the moment on the seemingly simpler question of the extent to which biblical literature actually does have an oral origin or precedent in Israel.

Writing is far from being a simple recording mechanism: if it preserves, fixes, and disseminates material that already exists, it also creates new possibilities for composition, and we find the roots of much ancient literature amongst these. An obvious example is the law code, which can present, arrange, and fix hundreds of laws. Although individual laws and customs were certainly used before such codes (and probably continued to be used in both Mesopotamia and Greece), it is questionable whether they would, or could, have been organized in this way, and a code on the scale of Hammurabi's, or of the Great Code of Gortyn, would have been inconceivable before the invention of writing. That is, literally inconceivable: oral cultures do not sit around aspiring to create such works until the technology arrives to permit them, and the notion of fixing things in writing is consequent upon the development of writing.¹⁴ So too, rather differently, are several types of literature which emerge in Egypt, where writing gave, for the first time, a voice to the dead among the living. It is a matter of definition whether tomb autobiographies should themselves be regarded as literary, but they were highly influential upon the development of many literary

12 Alan Dundes, *Holy Writ as Oral Lit: The Bible as Folklore* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 1991), 20, citing (15) Klaus Koch, *The Growth of the Biblical Tradition: The Form-Critical Method* (London: Black, 1969), 81; trans. of *Was ist Formgeschichte? Neue Wege der Bibeldexegese* (Neukirche-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1964).

13 Conversely, it is not easy to understand how or why such ephemera as prophetic oracles did come to be preserved in writing, unless, of course, the works which we have are not quite what they claim to be.

14 The development of written codes in Greece is examined in the context of orality and literacy by Kevin Robb, *Literacy and Paideia in Ancient Greece* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), chs. 3–5.

works.¹⁵ One of the earliest and greatest Egyptian narratives, the *Tale of Sinuhe*, presents itself (fictionally) as such an autobiography, and the classic instruction genre, with its own testamentary flavour, seems closely related to the ethical sections of the tomb inscriptions.¹⁶ Indeed, the very tendency of Egyptian literature to present all sorts of material as the speech of an individual seems to go back to these texts. The same point could be made, with greater or lesser degrees of certainty, about various other ancient compositions: they are not simply written manifestations of oral paradigms.

The extent to which Israelite literature emerged directly from other uses of writing within Israel itself is uncertain. Particular "literate" genres have surely been inherited from elsewhere, though, and that brings me to a second point: if a text or type of text does go back to oral prototypes, it does not necessarily do so directly, and the transition did not necessarily occur locally. We may suppose, to take an extreme case, that the basic characteristics of rhythmic poetry were developed for oral transmission in the distant past—but that does not make John Keats an oral poet. The facts that some characteristics of oral composition may persist into written modes of composition, and that literature may choose deliberately to imitate oral composition, make it difficult to assess the significance of oral traits in any given text. In Judges, for instance, we may freely acknowledge that many stories are told in a style which is oral-traditional, but that does not prove that the writer or his source heard those very stories told orally: traditional modes of expression may simply be a genre-marker for literary compositions, as in the case of many modern fairy-tales. As Niditch concedes, "[i]t is, of course, extremely difficult if not in many cases impossible to distinguish between oral-traditional imitative written works and orally performed works that were then set in writing."¹⁷

The issue of locality complicates matters further. Although the *use* of proverbs may be an oral phenomenon, the *collecting* of proverbs is a literary activity, and in the ancient world almost certainly gave rise to the creation of new aphorisms in the genre of sentence literature. So where this genre is picked up in the book of Proverbs, what are we dealing with? Sayings collected locally from oral tradition, sayings

15 See especially Jan Assmann, "Schrift, Tod und Identität: Das Grab als Vorschule der Literatur im alten Ägypten," in *Schrift und Gedächtnis: Beiträge zur Archäologie der literarischen Kommunikation* (ed. Aleida Assmann, Jan Assmann and Christof Hardmeier; Archäologie der literarischen Kommunikation 1; Munich: Fink, 1983), 64–93.

16 See Stuart Weeks, *Instruction and Imagery in Proverbs 1–9* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), ch. 1.

17 Niditch, *Oral World*. 125.

inherited from other, foreign sentence literature—perhaps originating in oral traditions elsewhere—or sayings composed *ad hoc* to create new sentence literature? There is no simple answer, and it is clearly unhelpful to rely on the original orality of proverbial performance to provide one. Once literature has itself taken up the contents or conventions of oral tradition, they may be passed on or imitated across long distances or periods of time through purely literary processes, and the recognition of their original nature may tell us little or nothing about the origins or culture of the work in which they appear.

Not all ancient literature, then, has an origin in oral tradition, and even material which seems oral in origin may never actually have existed in that form, at least in Israel. With respect to both these points, it is important to appreciate that writing and literature had been established for many centuries in the region before there even was an Israel, and that the relationship between the oral and the literary in Israel or Judah can hardly be considered without reference to a much broader picture. From the second, in particular, though, it is also clear that we cannot work with a simple binary opposition between the oral and the literate, at least in terms of what is produced by each. This problem, in fact, goes deeper: although it may seem obvious that one is spoken and the other written, difficulties arise as soon as we try to characterize, say, a written poem read out loud, or the transcript of a taped oral performance. Those difficulties become especially acute, of course, in the ancient context, where much literature was written for performance out loud, and was perhaps rarely read silently.¹⁸ If we shift our attention from the mode of delivery to the mode of composition, though, it still remains no easier to say which someone is creating when, for instance, they improvise a speech or poem around a set of notes. These sorts of problems are not merely fanciful objections: writing of sub-Saharan Africa, Ruth Finnegan observed that “[a] poem first composed and written down . . . may pass into the oral tradition and be transmitted by word of mouth, parallel to the written form; oral compositions, on the other hand, are sometimes preserved by being written down. In short,

18 Although silent reading was unusual, against the common assertion that it was so rare in classical and late antiquity as to provoke astonishment see F. D. Gilliard, “More Silent Reading in Antiquity: *Non omne verbum sonabat*,” *JBL* 112 (1993): 689–94. The situation for Hebrew readers is uncertain, and the dynamics of text with an unvocalized script rather different, but habit is not the only issue: the difficulties of copying a text point to performance or shared reading aloud as the simplest way to achieve distribution or publication, and the most efficient use of whatever copies did exist.

the border-line between oral and written in these areas is often by no means clear-cut."¹⁹

This might push us towards Niditch's idea of a "continuum between Israelite orality and literacy,"²⁰ but that idea actually implies a very clear distinction, and for Niditch, the two do not merge but intertwine. This "continuum" involves a discernibly oral "aesthetic," which permeates much of the biblical literature, and which can be identified through a specifically oral style and register. Alongside that aesthetic, there sits a particular set of attitudes toward writing which, in the earlier monarchic period at least, are deemed "illiterate" — more typical of oral than of literate cultures. We have already touched on the problems involving style and register, but it should be noted that Niditch is willing to associate with oral style even features that are hardly specific to oral composition, such as the use of divine epithets, or of repeated *Leitworte*. "Illiterate" attitudes to writing, moreover, are supposedly reflected in, for example, the use of monumental inscriptions that were not intended to be read—which would presumably make, say, the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Wall a testament to modern US illiteracy—whilst literacy is approached largely in terms of the practical uses of writing.²¹ Such criteria load the dice in favour of orality for almost any creative composition, and others are introduced on similar lines even with respect to non-creative activities.²² It seems pointless to quibble over precise criteria, however, when more fundamental problems of definition and distinction are involved: much of the material that Niditch seems to be discussing does not reflect the tension or connection between two separate phenomena, so much as the capacity of one thing to become another when it changes context or function.

In the end, for all that we may recognize oral influences upon much of the biblical literature, and the possibility that this literature arose through more complicated processes than those typically involved in

19 Ruth Finnegan, *Oral Literature in Africa* (The Oxford Library of African Literature; Oxford: Clarendon, 1970), 52.

20 Niditch, *Oral World*, 108. Carr, *Writing*, 6–7, is critical of the term and concept.

21 Cf. Niditch, *Oral World*, 58–59: "the purpose of writing in these cases is not primarily for record keeping or for future consultation or even in order that the inscription be read in its own time. . . . Such writing is monumental and iconic. It reflects a respect for the ways in which writing creates and transforms, a respect for writing more common among the illiterate than among those who are literate in the modern sense."

22 So, for instance, Niditch (*Oral World*, 68) comments on omen texts that "[t]he practical benefits of writing thus intermingle with oral-world assumptions about the efficacy of omens." It is difficult to see what, though, is specifically "oral-world" about such assumptions, unless she means simply that they may pre-date the existence of the texts.

modern authorship, what we actually have is literature, and the fact of that literature's emergence in a primarily oral culture. This is a great deal more interesting than it sounds, and potentially more significant than any question of oral influence. As Walter Ong has emphasized, we tend to look at orality from a profoundly literate perspective,²³ and one aspect of this may be that we tend to accept literature as natural or inevitable, without always recognizing its implications in a less literate society. These implications lie in various areas, and there is a whole range of ways in which scholars have understood literacy and literature to shape thought and society. Here I want to focus briefly, however, on the more specific issues concerning history-writing, which spring from the capacity of writing to fix and preserve. This capacity is vital for some purposes, but it is a cultural bias on our part to assume that it is inherently a valuable characteristic. We need, in fact, to appreciate that the absence of such a capacity in oral tradition may be no less valuable or valued.

It should be noted first that oral composition is commonly improvisational, and not intended to produce material which will be fixed. To take a familiar instance, the Parry-Lord hypothesis for the origin of the Homeric texts does not envisage verbatim memorization of long epics, but the use of a narrative framework and remembered rhythmic formulae to create a fresh poem for each performance.²⁴ Although shorter poems may be memorized and passed on essentially unchanged, creativity and adaptation is a hallmark of much oral performance,²⁵ whilst the memorization of long poems is more commonly associated with literate societies, and the notion of a fixed text.²⁶ Oral performance is

23 Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (2d ed.; London: Routledge, 2002), 7–10.

24 The hypothesis is set out most famously in Albert B. Lord, *The Singer of Tales* (Harvard Studies in Comparative Literature 24; Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1960).

25 So, for instance, Finnegan, *Oral Literature*, 148–49, notes in different African settings both the composition of new elegies for funerals, “using the accepted idioms and forms,” and the apparent transmission of certain famous elegies over long periods. As she notes elsewhere, though (107), preconceived ideas may have led some Western observers to overlook the degree of creativity involved in much poetic performance.

26 As one psychologist puts it, “the human accomplishment of lengthy verbatim recall arises as an adaptation to written text and does not arise in cultural settings where text is unknown. The assumption that nonliterate cultures encourage lengthy verbatim recall is the mistaken projection by literates of text-dependent frames of reference” (Ian M. L. Hunter, “Lengthy Verbatim Recall: the Role of Text,” in *Progress in the Psychology of Language* [ed. Andrew W. Ellis; London: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1985], 207–35 [207]). Hunter defines “lengthy” as over fifty words. David C. Rubin, *Memory in Oral Traditions: The Cognitive Psychology of Epic, Ballads, and Count-*

quintessentially an ephemeral activity, through which stories or themes find constant re-expression, rather than a conscious re-presentation of established versions. Improvisation and adaptation is also found in the transmission of matter which might be considered more specifically historical or factual. Thomas's study of family traditions in Athens, for example, highlights the extent to which these were oriented to the contemporary needs and circumstances of each generation.²⁷ As she observes elsewhere, "If traditions are fundamental to the current social and geographical organization of a group (tribe, city, family), anthropologists find that they may change with alarming rapidity when the social divisions themselves change"; and in the case of Athenian genealogies, "undemocratic and unsuitable ancestors were quietly set aside and eventually forgotten."²⁸

This warns us not to place too much reliance on oral tradition as a source for historical reconstruction, and should give pause for thought, at least, to those who see such tradition as a bridge between historical events and later biblical sources.²⁹ The data change, however, not

ing-Out Rhymes (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995) has examined the transmission of various oral genres, noting the ways in which works are formulated to assist recollection. He finds variation, though, even in very short works, and considerable "instability" in longer ones. For the handful of known or supposed counter-examples, see Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, 61–67. Professional "remembrancers" do exist in some societies, but their role is generally confined to the transmission of very specific data, or to a more general remembering of, for example, decisions reached by councils.

27 Rosalind Thomas, *Oral Tradition and Written Record in Classical Athens* (Cambridge Studies in Oral and Literate Culture 18; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), chs. 2–3.

28 Rosalind Thomas, *Literacy and Orality in Ancient Greece* (Key Themes in Ancient History; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 109.

29 Certain data can be preserved for long periods in oral tradition, but it can be difficult to identify which elements have been passed down, and very difficult to disentangle fact from interpretation. As Elizabeth Tonkin puts it, "professional historians who use the recollections of others cannot just scan them for useful facts to pick out, like currants from a cake" (*Narrating our Pasts: The Social Construction of Oral History* [Cambridge Studies in Oral and Literate Culture 22; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992], 6). In her chapter 5, she provides a valuable critique of Jan Vansina's influential supposition, that oral tradition typically passes on a core of past knowledge, susceptible to critical examination as a document would be. Issues of contextualization aside, individual data are liable to what is sometimes called in the field "structural amnesia," of which the Athenian genealogies are only one example. J. Goody and I. Watt ("The Consequences of Literacy," in *Literacy in Traditional Societies* [ed. J. Goody; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968], 27–68 [33]) note an instance from Ghana, where the Gonja attributed seven sons to their founder, corresponding to the number of tribal divisions whose chiefs were eligible to become head of state; sixty years after this was recorded, two of those divisions had ceased to exist, and the founder then "was credited with only five sons." Biblical

because the transmission is unreliable, so much as because the past is subservient to the present, and the changing values or situations of the traditions are expressed, consciously or unconsciously, through changing depictions of the past (mirroring, to a great extent, the way in which human memory itself can re-shape experience). Without a fixed and canonical version of the past, moreover, a society can contain variant traditions, supporting different claims or senses of identity, which need never meet, let alone come into conflict. The introduction of written history, however, changes all that, and the promulgation of such history within a primarily oral society, especially if it is backed by political authority, not only creates tensions, but potentially re-shapes self-understanding within the society.

Shryock's research amongst the Bedouin in Jordan offers many insights into the process.³⁰ Seeking to collect and examine the oral histories of two tribes, Shryock found himself in a situation where different groups maintained steadfastly different accounts of the past, so that the possibility of him creating a single account, validated by publication, was perceived by his informants as profoundly problematic, even though it covered a relatively minor set of events and relationships. On a much wider scale, printed national histories of Jordan were already changing things, not only by promoting a past oriented to Hashemite interests, but by linking the past to the nation, so that the national boundary, for example, artificially excluded consideration of the cisjordanian Bedouin. This is to simplify the matter considerably, but the key point for our present purpose is the radical difference which it highlights between written and oral histories, and the tension which can exist between them. A similar cautionary tale is told by Henige of Torben Monberg, who returned to the site of his fieldwork in Oceania to discover what impact his published collection of local tales had had on the population. He discovered disquiet not only about the omission of some tales, which it was assumed would now die out, and about the inclusion of tales which put some people's ancestors in a bad light, but also about the exclusion of some perspectives: "One informant had an answer for Monberg . . . he should 'make a new book containing all the different versions of stories' since this would be a work that 'nobody

scholars may care to reflect on that story for other reasons, but the significant general point is that even—perhaps especially—key structural information is subject to rapid revision.

30 Andrew Shryock, *Nationalism and the Genealogical Imagination: Oral History and Textual Authority in Tribal Jordan* (Comparative Studies on Muslim Societies 23; Berkeley, Ca.: University of California Press, 1997).

would fight about."³¹ Goody and Watt, moreover, cite the example of the Tiv in Nigeria, whose typically flexible genealogies were so widely used in court cases that British administrators made the effort to record them for posterity: in the next generation, of course, subsequent administrators found themselves seriously out of step with the Tiv, to whom the records now seemed inaccurate, and the attempt to preserve tradition became a source of deep disagreement.³² If the other examples show the difficulties arising from acknowledged variation between traditions, this last shows something no less important: the recreated past in an oral society is not seen as recreated, and does not lack authority.

For the very different context of medieval England, Clanchy notes that,

without documents, the establishment of what passed for truth was simple and personal, since it depended on the good word of one's fellows. Remembered truth was also flexible and up to date, because no ancient custom could be proved to be older than the memory of the oldest living wise man. There was no conflict between past and present, between ancient precedents and present practice. . . . "[T]he law itself remains young, always in the belief that it is old."³³

His further observation, that attitudes to writing were correspondingly informed by a deep popular mistrust, could be applied to many societies in which writing has been given an authoritative role against a largely oral backdrop. In the Israelite context, it has long been understood that the creation of the Pentateuch and the historical Books was an unusual, perhaps unprecedented, move toward the creation of a national history, and that these books probably played a significant role in the establishment or shaping of identity.³⁴ We must also appreciate, however, that so far as those who received them were concerned, they effectively put an end to the constant reinvention of history and identity which is so characteristic of oral societies, or at least pushed it into the sort of literate channels exemplified by the reworking of the Deuteronomistic History in Chronicles. Rather than presuming simple acquiescence or enthusiasm, we must further understand that promulgation of the biblical texts imposed upon their society not only these

31 David Henige, *Oral Historiography* (London: Longman, 1982), 128, citing Torben Monberg, "Informants Fire Back: A Micro-Study in Anthropological Methods," *Journal of Polynesian Studies* 84 (1975): 218–24.

32 Goody and Watt, "Consequences," 32.

33 Clanchy, *From Memory*, 296. The quotation is from F. Kern, *Kingship and Law in the Middle Ages* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1939), 179.

34 See Stuart Weeks, "Biblical Literature and the Emergence of Ancient Jewish Nationalism," *BiblInt* 10 (2002): 144–57.

new constraints, which may not have been welcome to everybody, but also a significantly new relationship with the past.

It is important, then, to emphasize that writing is not just the continuation of orality by other means. If literate and oral methods continued to interact throughout the Israelite period, as they did, indeed, in much later Judaism, we must recognize, nonetheless, that they were also different things, and that interaction does not imply an identity of character or function. Written texts may inherit oral features but they may also have their own separate origins; they may be performed orally, moreover, but they are memorized, not improvised. Carr writes that, "[o]rality and writing technology are joint means for accomplishing a common goal: accurate recall of the treasured tradition,"³⁵ but the treasured traditions of oral societies are not fixed or agreed: to copy or recite them, rather than recall and compose them afresh each time, is to alter their nature. To fix them is to change them. The written tradition no longer adapts fluidly to the changing needs of its context, and if it tells one version, then it may exclude countless others for ever. Once it had been fixed by writers, then, and promulgated as a text, the story of Israel was no longer shaped by Israel; indeed, we might say instead that Israel came to be shaped by its story.

It is a pleasure to offer this to Graham Davies on the occasion of his retirement. His thoughtful and thorough work on Israel's writings, both biblical and epigraphic, has left us all in his debt.

35 Carr, *Writing*, 7.